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ESCAPING TERRITORIES OF TERROR

Protective strategies against intersectional violence at checkpoints

Iryna Ignatieva

Introduction

Territories under military occupation are defined by urban infrastructure repurposed to instill terror against local citizens resisting this new regime. The only way out is by going through checkpoints, where civilians are regularly exposed to violence based on the intersection of different social axes. People preparing to flee are already aware of the risks of being exposed to violence, so they prepare themselves and their digital devices beforehand, expecting to be inspected and interrogated.

Intersection is used here as an analytical lens to analyze violence as a complex phenomenon constructed across numerous axes of social division that influence each other (Collins and Bilge 2016). The introduction of intersectionality aims to highlight the complex nature of violence that contributes to social inequality and injustice, as people are exposed to violence differently depending on their overlapping identities. The connection “between violence, intersectional power relations, and political resistance” (Collins 2017, 1460) is starkly evident at wartime checkpoints, where the power of those with weapons is unrestrained, embodying the limitless authority of the occupiers.

In this chapter, I aim to investigate wartime checkpoints as both sites of increased violence and places where migrants exercise their agency in attempting to flee safely. My focus is on the protective strategies that forced migrants use at checkpoints and how these strategies are influenced by the intersectionality of violence. In my exploration, I first look at how Ukrainian identity, which significantly increases the risk of violence, intersects with gender at checkpoints. Then, I explore the strategies used to mitigate the violence that arises from this intersection.

What distinguishes the Ukrainian case is that Ukrainian identity can be concealed at checkpoints, allowing individuals to present a “safe identity” instead of the real one. Moreover, Russia’s war in Ukraine stands out as the most digitized state-to-state war in history. Smartphone users create and share content that impacts the course of the conflict, creating a new ecology of warfare (Ford and Hoskins 2022). At checkpoints, where smartphones are routinely checked, digital footprint becomes a significant risk factor. Therefore, exploring the process of building “safe identities” is inseparable from investigating the digital practices implemented before and during the escape.

Gender-based violence at war

Intersectionality in war studies helps to grasp how deep structural inequalities are implicated in different forms of violence. In territories under occupation, where legal structures are lacking, the risk of physical, verbal, and psychological abuse rises significantly. Identities, ideologies, and practices come together to normalize domination and violence (Peterson 2007). War rhetoric often uses an “us” versus “them” mindset to justify violence. In each specific case, a distinct “they” group is defined by markers such as race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality, fostering a perception of an enemy to rationalize aggression.

In war studies, the power struggle is often depicted through the intersectionality of masculinity, militarism, and imperialism (Peterson 2007). Men are portrayed as “warriors,” while women are seen as needing protection, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Elshtain 1982). This dynamic can be converted into militarized masculinity, which is used to explain sexual violence during war (Zurbriggen 2010; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009). While this simplistic view ignores the relational and situational aspects of gender construction, it emphasizes that extreme gender differences intensified by the war can only be maintained through continuous violence (Chinkin and Kaldor 2013). Gender-based violence that was once unimaginable during peacetime becomes normalized when victims are dehumanized as “them” (Maiese 2003).

Individuals from the “them” group experience violence in war differently based on the gender roles projected onto them. Over 70 percent of women experience gender-based violence in crisis settings, with women and girls being particularly vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence, even in post-conflict periods (UN Women 2017; Cohen and Nordås 2014). While male victimization is often overlooked (Kreft and Agerberg 2024), the data indicates that men are more at risk of being killed in direct armed conflicts, whether they are combatants or civilians (Ormhaug et al. 2009). Men in war face gender-based violence like sex-selective massacres, forced conscription, and sexual violence (Carpenter 2006).

Violence targeting LGBTQI+ individuals is part of the broader spectrum of gender-based violence and shares the same root causes. In conflict zones, especially those characterized by “strict enforcement of gender norms and rigid sexual morality as mechanisms of social control,” violence against LGBTQI+ individuals is sadly predictable (Outright International 2023, 8). During military conflicts, homophobia plays a fundamental role in the production of gender and sexual orders required by warfare and deployed by armed groups (Serrano-Amaya 2018).

In literature examining the spatial dimensions of military conflict, checkpoints are depicted as essential components of the occupation matrix, extending militarization and symbolizing territorial expansion (Tawil-Souri 2011). The spatial nature of checkpoints is tied to the dynamics of conflict. Studies examining checkpoint systems in Israel portray checkpoints as “nonplaces” (Tawil-Souri 2011) or as “states of exception” (Mansbach 2009). These studies illustrate the solidification and bureaucratization of borders during peace-building efforts in the long-term Israel-Palestine conflict, emphasizing that violence at checkpoints cannot be eradicated but rather shifts from physical to structural forms (Braverman 2012). Consequently, any exertion of power seeks to justify violence at checkpoints, whether in open military confrontations or during the peace-building process (Kotef and Amir 2011).

Recent studies define checkpoints as “gendered spaces,” where regulations on women’s mobility differ significantly from those imposed on men (Griffiths and Repo 2021). Kotef and Amir define checkpoints as “highly gendered military zones” that bring different forms of patriarchal power into motion. The gender binary at checkpoints sustains a distinct order associated with occupation (Kotef and Amir 2007, 993).

An investigation of incident reports from checkpoints in Iraq demonstrated that deadly outcomes are often the result of “bad feelings” of guards and that decisions to use force are not spontaneous but rather influenced by a set of gendered and racialized assumptions, particularly regarding the behavior of military-age males, which is often perceived as hostile (Gregory 2019).

Having elaborated on the existing literature, I now focus on Russia’s war in Ukraine, a recent military conflict that resulted in territories being occupied. This case provides an opportunity to examine the process of oppression and the accompanying violence at checkpoints in motion before the occupation regime becomes entrenched.

I argue that checkpoints are part of the urban infrastructure of terror in occupied territories. The Ukrainian case highlights that the system of checkpoints does more than mark the borders of occupied territories or restrict movement within these territories; it filters out individuals who deviate from the occupiers’ ideological vision or resist the regime. Checkpoints are spaces where the intersections of violence, rooted in the territorial regime, are clearly evident. To support this argument, in the next passage, I will briefly introduce the history of the occupation of Ukraine, explain how the regime of terror is established in these territories, and discuss the role checkpoints play in constructing “territories of terror.”

Russia’s war in Ukraine: Territories of terror

Russia’s war in Ukraine began with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and escalated when Russian and proxy forces seized parts of Donetsk and Luhansk. The conflict’s second phase started on February 24, 2022, with a full-scale Russian invasion, occupying significant areas in the Southeast and Northeast. As of 2024, the military confrontation continues with relatively static front lines.

The armed conflict led to significant migration flows, with 1.7 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) between 2014 and 2022 (IOM 2017). After the February 2022 invasion, this number surged to about 10 million forced migrants (UNHCR 2022).

There is a clear distinction between long-term occupied territories like Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk; short-term occupied areas such as Northeast Ukraine and Kherson (reclaimed after months); and territories under continuous occupation since 2022. While all these regions face oppressive regimes, the duration of occupation affects resistance. In long-term occupied areas, resistance diminishes as those labeled as “them” flee or face repression, leading to a more entrenched regime that justifies its presence.

The full-scale invasion escalated the conflict and exposed Russia as an aggressor, reinforcing ideology to justify the new military campaign. Before 2022, Russia’s rhetoric portrayed itself as a peacekeeper. The full-scale invasion redefined the conflict as a “special operation” to overthrow the “Kyiv regime.” Russia’s ideological narrative has shifted from the idea of “brotherhood nations” to a concept of “one nation” (Putin 2021a), implying Ukraine is an artificial nation and should be “denationalized” (Laruelle 2024, 15).

The Russian war narrative frames their invasion of Ukraine as a continuation of their historical fight against Nazism. This perspective labels Ukrainians as “Nazis” and calls for the “denazification and demilitarization” of Ukraine (Putin 2021b). The rhetoric used by Russian officials and state media employs dehumanizing language, depicting Ukrainians as “Nazis” and mortal enemies. This portrayal legitimizes or “justifies them as targets for destruction” (New Lines Institute and RWI 2022, 15–18). Anyone who identifies as Ukrainian is branded a “Nazi” simply for refusing to acknowledge being Russian (Snyder 2022). The twisted logic behind the violence against Ukrainians asserts that they do not exist, and if they disagree, they are either forced into re-education or killed.

Mass atrocities in liberated Ukrainian areas have sparked discussions about Russian actions in Ukraine as a crime of genocide (Azarov et al. 2023; Snyder 2022). Although proving genocide legally requires time, the documented violence in 2022-occupied areas appears deliberate rather than random. Numerous examples of violence committed by Russian occupying forces demonstrate that their actions align with the official rhetoric of targeting anyone identified as Ukrainian. In Bucha, Russian soldiers went door-to-door “hunting Nazis” (Human Rights Watch 2022a). Documented cases of ideologically motivated torture, mass executions, and rape in the Kyiv region are supported by reports from liberated areas in the Northeast (Chernihiv, Sumy) and Southeast (Kherson, Zaporizhzhia) (OHCHR 2022a; Amnesty International 2022; Human Rights Watch 2022b).

In preparation for the invasion, the Russian military compiled lists of influential Ukrainians, including officials, activists, and journalists, for targeted killing or imprisonment (Sabbagh 2022; Center for Civil Liberties 2022). Reports indicate that even teachers of Ukrainian history and language were targeted (Petruniok 2024). From day one, the regime in these occupied territories was built around the idea that any expression of Ukrainian identity was life-threatening.

Violence against civilians in 2022-occupied territories often targeted Ukrainian men, who make up the majority of those murdered or executed by Russian forces. These acts frequently involved detention and torture beforehand (Human Rights Watch 2022a; OHCHR 2022b). Most enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions also involve men who were arrested at home, at work, on the street, or at checkpoints (OHCHR 2023).

Corresponding with broader violence patterns in war, the primary civilian victims of rape and sexual violence in Ukraine are women and girls (UNHCR 2023, 12; U.S. Department of State 2024, 85). According to the UN Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, these documented cases show that rape was used deliberately by the Russian military to “dehumanize the victims” as part of their strategy (Ochab 2022).

As Russia considers the occupied territories of Ukraine to be part of its territory, it enforces Russian legislation that discriminates against the expression of LGBTQI+ identity (Human Rights Watch 2014). Occupation authorities use homophobic propaganda, and those identified as LGBTQI+ suffer insults, violence, extortion, freedom restrictions, and threats to their lives (Human Rights Watch 2014; U.S. Department of State 2023; ADC Memorial and Center for Civil Liberties 2016; Nash Svit Center 2022).

The terror in the occupied territories forced locals to flee, if they could, towards the west into Ukrainian-controlled areas or eastward, especially when the western route was cut off. In 2022, after the front line stabilized around the occupied territories once again, both sides set up systems of checkpoints. People attempting to reach Ukraine-controlled territories had to first navigate through Russian checkpoints and then traverse the “grey zone” or “no-man’s land,” where they faced the risk of being caught in the crossfire or encountering mines.

Those evacuating through the eastern route were sent to “filtration” sites, where many were interrogated, tortured, or killed (Khoshnood et al. 2022). Filtration involved collecting fingerprints, photos, and passports, seizing devices, and conducting security interrogations. The Yale Humanitarian Research Lab identified 21 such facilities used for holding, registration, and interrogation (Khoshnood et al. 2022).

The filtration process was not limited to the border crossing; eventually, it was implemented “on-site” in areas occupied after February 2022, with everyone there subjected to filtration (Lysenko 2023, 8). Civilians underwent filtration at all internal roadblocks within and between

cities. In Mariupol, all residents, even those not planning to leave, were required to carry a “filtration certificate” and passport to move within the city. Despite this requirement, filtration certificates were not always checked later, suggesting that “on-site filtration” was used not just for identification but also to target and suppress dissenters (Badyuk 2023).

In occupied territories, censorship, surveillance, political oppression, repression of free speech, and movement restrictions created a “climate of fear” (OHCHR 2024b). The regime adapted existing infrastructure to suppress resistance, using torture as an extension of “filtration.” Reports highlight a widespread network of “torture chambers” operating openly in every city where systematic torture is conducted (Petruniok 2024). The population is aware of these locations and the risks of arbitrary detention or torture. The infrastructure for detection and torture was reinforced by a comprehensive surveillance and control system. Street surveillance cameras were repurposed to monitor and identify potential resistance among locals, and their numbers significantly increased over time.

Russia’s efforts to isolate occupied territories have made it extremely hard for residents to leave or communicate with areas outside its control. Soon after the occupation, internet traffic was rerouted through Russian providers, and Ukrainian mobile infrastructure was co-opted, introducing Russian phone numbers and SIM cards. This control over telecommunications subjects civilians in occupied territories to Russian internet regulations, surveillance, and censorship, characteristic of a “networked authoritarian regime” (Lokot 2023).

A significant factor shaping the regime in occupied territories is the rise of “civil intelligence,” where civilians crowdsource location-based military information by sharing location pins, photos, and videos of military activities. This use of technology fundamentally changed the nature of war, putting anyone with a smartphone at risk (Schmitt and Biggerstaff 2022; Ford 2023). Consequently, Russians extensively tapped mobile phones and monitored electronic communications as part of their “filtration” efforts. Phones were confiscated during detentions, house searches, and encounters with Russian soldiers, who threatened death to those who resisted (U.S. Department of State 2023).

Attempting to conceptualize the regime under occupation, I refer to the concept of “refiguration of spaces” (Löw 2023), which effectively captures how social changes are reflected in social spaces. This concept is highly relevant for exploring the fundamental changes brought about by war and military occupation. Modern warfare, characterized by rapid digitalization, aligns with the vision of modern spatial order with increased mobility, concentrated knowledge, and digital mediatization (Knoblauch and Löw 2020). The “refiguration of spaces” framework identifies territory, trajectory, place, and network as key spatial figures, where place follows a logic of intersection, territory a logic of demarcation, trajectory a logic of transit, and network a logic of association (Hecht and Kirchner 2023; see Löw in this volume).

The spatial figure of territory is central to explaining the processes occurring post occupation. Checkpoints are not merely locations on the road that delimit the trajectories of forced migrants’ escape but are spaces that merge strongly with the logic of the territorial regime. Escaping “territories of terror” means confronting the regime in defined places, namely checkpoints.

The military occupation represents a violent intrusion into a pre-existing spatial order, and filtration is merely an attempt to assert control over this world. As a consequence of the occupation, old and new spatial realities collide, compelling all forms of resistance against the new order to go “underground,” forcing Ukrainian identity and any connection to Ukrainian spatial reality to be hidden. Checkpoints violently embody this spatial conflict, where any sign of belonging to another spatial reality must be erased to survive.

Violence at checkpoints

The role of checkpoints is central to the filtration process; they are a manifestation of filtration in space. Going through checkpoints leading east or west, or simply moving through the system of checkpoints inside occupied territories, means inevitable filtration. Guards at checkpoints are typically tasked with identifying individuals who may pose a threat to the regime. During an ongoing war, the stakes for this task are exceptionally high. Documented cases of violence at checkpoints demonstrate that the process of crossing checkpoints is highly subjective, arbitrary, and random. Checkpoints function as literal physical filters, exposing everyone to physical violence, detention, abduction, or even death.

The “filtration” process is enforced by blocking access to Ukraine-controlled areas. Early in the full-scale invasion, evacuating westward was dangerous, with Russian forces targeting civilians on foot, by bus, or in private vehicles. The OHCHR report highlights brutal killings of civilians trying to escape by car, even those with white flags or signs indicating children (OHCHR 2022a; Human Rights Watch 2022a). At Kramatorsk train station, the biggest transport hub in Eastern Ukraine, an attack on evacuees, mainly women and children, resulted in 66 deaths (BBC 2022).

Throughout 2022, routes into Ukraine were consistently cut off, with Russian forces imposing deadlines for those trying to leave. By October 2022, new requirements mandated a special permit for those seeking to leave, causing significant delays and expiration of permits before crossing. By August, ten people had died while waiting in line (U.S. Department of State 2023). By December 2022, the last exit corridor from occupied territories near Vasylivka (Zaporizhzhya Oblast) was closed. By October 2023, entry into the Russian Federation for Ukrainians was restricted to a single road checkpoint.

Occupying Russian authorities have pressured residents in occupied territories to obtain Russian citizenship and passports. Those without Russian passports faced intense scrutiny, prolonged questioning, and threats at border crossings and checkpoints (OHCHR 2024a, 17). Ukrainian passports and IDs have been confiscated during the “filtration” process (Filipchuk et al. 2022). For military-aged men, obtaining Russian passports poses a risk of forced conscription, with documented cases of men being conscripted at checkpoints while trying to leave occupied areas (OHCHR 2024a, 18).

Locals experience violence differently at checkpoints based on their gender, and Russia’s war in Ukraine exemplifies this disparity. Young men are the most targeted group in checkpoint crossings (von Löwis and Sasse 2021, 234), while young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. During the initial phase of the war (2014–2017), the OHCHR documented instances of conflict-related sexual violence at checkpoints on both sides of the contact line, predominantly affecting young women (OHCHR 2017).

Checkpoints reflect a broader pattern of violence within “territories of terror,” where vulnerability intensifies at the intersection of Ukrainian identity and gender. For instance, men undergo routine strip searches as Russian authorities look for nationalist symbols or ties to the Ukrainian military. Adult men are frequently detained for extensive questioning at checkpoints, and their documents and mobile phones are often confiscated.

According to the Nash Svit report, the majority of documented war crimes targeting LGBTQI+ individuals occurred at checkpoints or in areas patrolled by the Russian military in the occupied territories. The primary pretext for homo/transphobic abuse was confidential information about the victims’ private lives found on their phones, and in some cases, their appearance or manner of behavior (Nash Svit Center 2022).

Checkpoint violence, moreover, disproportionately targets marginalized groups based on ethnicity and race. For example, Ukrainian Roma, who have been historically vulnerable, face increased discrimination while fleeing occupied territories, often waiting for weeks at checkpoints before being permitted to cross (Radchenko 2022). The intersection of Roma identity and pro-Ukrainian activism is particularly risky: a Roma activist was detained after a checkpoint phone search revealed anti-Putin messages (Panchenko 2023).

Since Russia's 2014 occupation, Crimean Tatars, an indigenous Muslim community, have been subjected to politically and ethnically motivated discrimination. The full-scale invasion worsened this, with Crimean Tatars, especially men, being systematically detained at checkpoints on suspicion of conspiracy (Council of Europe 2023, 5). Those with pro-Ukrainian views suffer heightened violence, as seen in the Kherson region, where an Imam was detained at a checkpoint and tortured for his political stance (Ombudsman of Ukraine 2023, 21).

People of Color, including international students, trapped in occupied cities faced significant challenges in escaping to Ukrainian-controlled territories. In Kherson, those attempting to flee were denied passage "without special agreement," repeatedly turned back, threatened with guns, and had their car tires deflated at checkpoints. Deutsche Welle (DW) reported that students were captured at a checkpoint, blindfolded, and held for hours before being released, likely to avoid suspicion if the taxi driver returned without them (Nasinde and Busari 2022; Ovuorie 2022). Due to the international attention, Russia saw foreigners as a valuable propaganda tool. An intercepted conversation revealed that Russians were planning to forcibly evacuate Vietnamese residents of Kherson to Crimea for a propaganda video (State Security Service of Ukraine 2022).

Crossing checkpoints after 2022 has become an even riskier endeavor than in previous years due to the absence of external oversight. Unlike checkpoints controlled by Ukraine, Russian-controlled checkpoints lack international monitoring or humanitarian presence. Without such external protection, individuals must rely solely on their resourcefulness and adaptability to avoid potential violence.

"Safe identity"

In the realm of Russian ideology, any displays of Ukrainian identity by residents attempting to flee occupied territories subject them to grave danger. This compels them to craft a "safe" identity as their sole means of passage. This is facilitated by the fact that Ukrainians and Russians are not easily distinguishable by appearance. While language and culture are the defining elements of Ukrainian identity, these can also be masked due to the widespread bilingualism among Ukrainians. Ukrainian bilingualism, where individuals switch between Ukrainian and Russian depending on their situation, social standing, and place of residence, becomes instrumental when passing through checkpoints (Portnov 2019).

Recent studies on the transformation of Ukrainian cultural identity define the dominant identity as "national-civil" or "political," a term coined as a result of slow and consistent transformation starting in the 1990s and crystallized with the full-scale invasion (Sasse and Lackner 2019; Golovakha et al. 2024). Civic national identity, based on unity, solidarity, and equality across regions and social groups, has prevailed over ethnic identity. Over the 30 years of independence, ethnic identity has ranked lowest in the hierarchy of identities, which includes citizenship, gender, religion, city residence, age, language, and occupation (Golovakha et al. 2024, 306). While the Ukrainian language and culture remain significant, belonging to an active civil society has taken precedence in shaping this identity. This has led to a more nuanced understanding of identity,

encompassing combinations like Crimean Tatar Ukrainian or Russian-speaking Ukrainian. Rapid digitalization and widespread volunteer movement have played pivotal roles in its development. It is no surprise that the generation of Ukrainians raised in independent Ukraine strongly embraces this sense of belonging (Melnikov, Ignatieva, and Nastoyasha 2024).

The impact of war on identity in occupied territories is evident when comparing studies from Eastern Ukraine before and after 2014. Beyond those with clear pro-Russian or pro-Ukrainian stances, residents living through the traumatic events of war and occupation have created a “safe hierarchy of identities.” They have blended in with societal expectations by avoiding traits that could attract unwanted attention and choosing basic, recognizable identities tied to their hometown or region. In this context, adopting a “Slavic,” “local-regional,” or “local-urban” identity has been seen as the safest bet (Golovakha et al. 2024, 304).

However, the shift in identities among Eastern Ukraine inhabitants may not entirely clarify the dynamics observed at checkpoints in the occupied territories. Those seeking passage must portray themselves as belonging to a “safe” group, regardless of their identity. This aligns with Goffman’s “dramaturgical approach,” wherein individuals strategically present themselves in specific situations to exert control over the interaction (Goffman 1959). In peaceful times, travelers often come across what is termed as “security theater” at checkpoints (Pütz 2012)¹. However, during war, routine interactions can suddenly escalate into something far more dangerous, where moving across checkpoints poses an existential risk. An illustration of how civilians try to mislead guards about their identity at checkpoints in Syria involves Sunni civilians carrying pictures of Shia Sheikhs to convince soldiers that they are Shia (Schon 2016, 289).

In *Masquerades of War*, Kevin McSorley explores the conflict in Chechnya by employing Goffman’s concept of “masking,” illustrating it as both a “symbolic and literal harbinger of filtration” (McSorley 2015, 131). There is a notable parallel between the terror inflicted on civilians by Russian forces in modern Ukraine and Chechnya. Filtration in Chechnya served as a “gateway practice to systematic terror and associated extortion,” (121) marked by “non-selectivity” and “universal suspicion for men between the ages of ten and sixty” (121). Thus, everyone confronted with the new lawless reality becomes a “conscious strategist of survival” (122).

Due to the fluidity of “civic national identity,” individuals fleeing occupied territories can still conceal their true identity. This implies that individuals with a strong Ukrainian identity can present themselves as belonging to the “safe” category. However, if suspected of deviating from this “safe identity,” individuals are automatically exposed to the risk of violence determined by both their Ukrainian identity and other social markers.

This analysis vividly reveals the role of checkpoints in occupied territories as not merely bureaucratic control points, but rather as manifestations of a broader system of fear and intimidation. Checkpoints become focal points where violence emerges from the intersection of “otherness” and gender. While the existing literature extensively covers the violence occurring at checkpoints, it often fails to acknowledge the resourcefulness and resilience of civilians. Despite the oppressive conditions, individuals demonstrate remarkable agency in devising strategies for safer passage. By examining the methods through which safety is ensured, I want to gain insight into the complex dynamics at play in occupied territories and the resilience of forced migrants.

Research objectives

This study examines how migrants use their agency to escape occupied territories through checkpoints, which symbolize a regime of terror. It builds on the idea that successfully passing

through these checkpoints requires adopting a “safe identity,” which involves concealing one’s true intentions and identity. As strategies for safer passage are often driven by the violence experienced at checkpoints, this chapter focuses on two key questions:

RQ1: How do people escaping occupied territories mask their real identity behind a “safe identity” at checkpoints?

RQ2: To what extent is the formation of this “safe identity” influenced by the threat of violence resulting from the intersection of Ukrainian identity and gender?

Participants and methodology

This study integrates documentary analysis with qualitative interviews. It uses NGO reports to examine intersectional violence and discriminatory patterns at checkpoints and incorporates online resources frequently used by individuals preparing for these crossings. To enrich the analysis, I conducted seven in-depth interviews to gather detailed insights, perspectives, and experiences regarding the construction of a “safe identity” at checkpoints. It is essential to acknowledge that the interview sample is limited and does not reflect the broader population.

The dominant identity of all participants could be defined as a “civil-national” Ukrainian identity. Six out of the seven interviewees chose to conduct the interview in Ukrainian, and one in Russian. The participants included three women and four men who had fled territories in southern Ukraine occupied in 2022, specifically from Kherson, Nova Kakhovka, and Vasilyevka (Zaporizhzhya region).

I focused on the southern regions under occupation for several reasons. These areas offer valuable data on checkpoint crossings, unlike the briefly occupied northern territories where such practices have not fully developed. Additionally, the rapid establishment of the occupation regime in the south, driven by the presence of Russian troops, contrasts with the long-term, more entrenched occupation in Eastern Ukraine (Malyarenko and Kormych 2024).

The majority of the population in these areas identifies as ethnic Ukrainians and shows minimal support for unification with Russia (Rating Group 2022). Notably, the southern occupied territories are distinguished by active resistance, reflected in the local elites’ reluctance to cooperate with occupation forces and street protests against occupation. This resistance has led to widespread terror, including over 300 documented cases of forced disappearances in Zaporizhzhya Oblast within three months of occupation (U.S. Department of State 2023).

Ethical concerns guided my decision to exclude those who fled to Russia to protect their safety. The interviews were conducted using video conference software, transcribed, and translated into English. The interviewees’ statements have been anonymized for publication.

Results

Based on interview data and supported by other documented cases, this section begins by introducing the general context of the escape, detailing the conditions under which it occurred and the factors influencing it. It then delves into specific strategies used to safeguard passage through checkpoints, examining how these strategies relate to the threats of violence associated with Ukrainian identity and gender. The analysis demonstrates how a “safe identity” was constructed within the specific time-space continuum at the checkpoints.

Escape journey

All participants escaped after spending one to two months under occupation. In some areas, like Nova Kakhovka, leaving the city was impossible during the first month. With no official evacuation, people typically self-organized into convoys of buses and cars. The first escapees faced deadly risks, with some losing their lives to landmines. Initially, escape routes were shorter and had fewer checkpoints, but as the occupation continued and the front line shifted, the number of checkpoints on routes toward Ukraine-controlled territories increased to 30–50. The destruction of bridges and the closure of roads, such as the one through the Kakhovka Dam, forced people to take long detours. Escaping often meant spending days in cars, waiting in lines, exhausted, and facing the possibility of death on the road.

T. from Vasilyevka escaped on foot with his family in the first weeks of the occupation before the checkpoint system became more complicated. He recalled fearing encounters with unpredictable and potentially dangerous Russian forces. When they spotted a military patrol approaching, they hid off the road, remaining hidden until it was safe to continue. However, circumventing and avoiding Russian forces became nearly impossible once the checkpoint system was better organized.

At every checkpoint, Russian guards routinely checked documents and inspected phones. Anything indicating Ukrainian identity or pro-Ukrainian/pro-Western sentiments could lead to interrogations and severe consequences. The rise of civil intelligence apps heightened the guards' suspicions, particularly at checkpoints leading to Ukraine-controlled territories. They were on the lookout for such apps, and any sign of sending data could be interpreted as sharing military information with the Ukrainian army. M. from Vasilyevka shared an instance where a guard checked the calculator app on his iPhone, suspecting it was used for noting coordinates. I. from Nova Kakhovka mentioned that guards checked if GPS was turned on at every one of the 35 checkpoints she passed, demanding it be turned off for "security reasons."

As documented in many sources and confirmed by participants, men were routinely stripped at checkpoints as guards searched for tattoos indicating any affiliation with the Ukrainian army or national symbols. They also checked for bruises and marks that might suggest combat involvement. Women could also be stripped, though less frequently than men.

Participants developed various strategies to pass through checkpoints safely. They accumulated information from local online groups and acquaintances who had managed to escape. Efforts to appear "safe" at checkpoints fell into two categories: preparing mobile phones and other electronic devices and adopting performative measures believed to aid in passing through.

Preparing devices

Mobile phones are capable of revealing sensitive information individuals wish to keep private. Consequently, all participants, before escaping, thoroughly "cleaned" their devices, including mobile phones, laptops, and tablets. They deleted any photos with Ukrainian symbols or indications of pro-Ukrainian or pro-Western sentiments. Any footage of war-related destruction in their city was also erased. Participants made sure to remove all pro-Ukrainian searches from Google and YouTube that could incriminate them.

Social media posed another risk, so they unsubscribed from pro-Ukrainian channels and deleted chats or correspondence that might reveal their views. Often, they went a step further and deleted the social media apps where they were most active. Participants were aware that having a phone

“too clean” could appear suspicious. To avoid this, they meticulously performed selective cleaning, leaving only neutral information. They partially cleaned correspondence with friends, keeping only messages unrelated to the war, everyday conversations, and personal photos, while ensuring nothing incriminating remained. As an additional measure, V., from Kherson put her phone in airplane mode, fearing that new messages might pop up during a search and incriminate her. A similar pattern of phone “cleaning” was revealed in interviews with victims of interrogation and torture in occupied territories, as reported by NGO “Zmina” (Petruniok 2024, 24).

A pattern emerged of people under occupation using neutral language in their day-to-day messages, fearing sudden mobile phone searches or interrogations. In certain contexts, this neutral conversation masked more important topics being discussed. As one of the participants shared, people in occupied areas used language, disguised as innocent everyday conversations, to send information about the location of Russian military equipment. Messages like *“Do you remember where we played football last year? That is a nice place.”* could indicate the presence of Russian military equipment in that location now. In line with this reasoning, participants communicated with their families while on the route, ensuring not to reveal details but simply confirming their safety and the start of their journey.

As language is a key identifier of Ukrainian identity and an expression of a pro-Ukrainian stance, all respondents communicated with guards in Russian. Some participants switched their mobile phone language settings from Ukrainian to Russian in preparation for the journey. This is how I. from Nova Kakhovka recalled the moment when she reached Ukraine-controlled territories with a group of cars:

When we passed through the last checkpoint into the “gray zone,” [there were] fields, fields. There was still the threat of shelling because they could break the agreement... Maybe the first village where we felt safe, where we stopped at a store, everyone was so happy, people were crying, and we cried too. We started speaking Ukrainian, even though we hadn’t spoken Ukrainian at home before the war.

Performance

Speaking Russian at checkpoints was the most straightforward protective strategy to pass safely and avoid suspicion of having a Ukrainian identity. However, the strategies employed to mitigate the threat of violence stemming from the intersection of Ukrainian identity and gender were far more complex.

Women resorted to presenting themselves as unattractive as possible to avoid unwanted attention from guards, fearing sexual violence at the checkpoints. V. from Kherson, who was escaping in a car with two other women and small children, shared that she decided not to wash her hair before the trip and put effort into “being invisible” after hearing from a friend who had witnessed women being pulled out of cars at checkpoints just a few days earlier.

O. from Vasiliyevka, took extreme measures to keep her family safe during their escape. They had to leave quickly after being informed by the mayor, who refused to collaborate with the occupiers, that Russian authorities had created lists of people with pro-Ukrainian stances and her family was on the list. They had only 30 minutes before the guards’ shift change at the checkpoint leading out of the city. At that time, the route to Ukrainian-controlled territories took days and involved passing through more than 30 Russian-controlled checkpoints. Their plan was to tell the guards they were visiting relatives in a nearby village and then cut across the front line through the fields. Later, they

realized the fields were mined and felt fortunate to have survived. This risky endeavor was driven by fear for their men, who were likely to be the primary targets of violence.

Not everyone passed through checkpoints, and the abuse inflicted on the men... well, you think about the men first of all. As for the women, they were examined but at least not undressed...It always depended on the guards encountered, O. explained.

In addition to their cover story, a certain performance was necessary to pass through before the lists were checked. O. recalled that to persuade the guards to let them through, the women in the car cried, explaining that their homes had been shelled and they could no longer stay in the basement, which was, in fact, true.

Safety perception

Despite the effectiveness of described protective strategies, these often lacked rationality. For instance, turning phones to airplane mode or switching off GPS were driven by fear and chaos among both escapees and guards. These measures could be reversed in seconds by guards inspecting the phones or by migrants after passing the checkpoint. V. from Kherson expressed valid concerns that merely “cleaning devices” was insufficient, as technologies could recover deleted data. Reports from Zmina indicated that in occupied territories, mobile phone checks were specialized and improving (Petruniok 2024). However, interviews with escapees revealed that advanced technologies and intelligence were not always used at checkpoints, giving those who passed routine checks a better chance of avoiding more specialized scrutiny.

The irrational reasoning at checkpoints and border crossings is further highlighted in digital migration studies. A study on asylum seekers in Germany noted significant subjectivity in evaluating surveillance risks at the border and checkpoints, stating that “the boundaries between actual risks and speculation are fluid” (Steinbrink et al. 2021, 14). This suggests that protective strategies are heavily influenced not just by objective factors, but by migrants’ perceptions of safety at checkpoints, which can vary greatly among individuals.

Knowledge of protective strategies was often derived from rumors, networks of escapees, and social media. However, over time, social media became unreliable as occupation authorities began monitoring it. Additionally, people were frequently stopped on the streets, and their phones were confiscated. For example, I.’s father from Vasilyevka had his phone taken at a checkpoint and was given the choice to either surrender his phone or face death. Consequently, he had to inform his contacts that his phone number was no longer his. Over time, online activity in occupied cities decreased significantly as Russians could impersonate familiar usernames and use direct messages for interrogations.

Discussion

In spatial terms, the occupation regime creates a “territory of terror,” compelling everyone to devise survival strategies, whether through cooperation, underground resistance, or adopting a “safe identity.” The occupation regime consolidates its authority by actively suppressing individuals who openly resist or fail to conceal their true identities. Checkpoints are the defining elements of the territorial regime of terror, both deeply integrated into the urban canvas and marking its boundaries. Checkpoints are everywhere, within cities and across occupied territories. Spatial

visualization of checkpoints and roadblocks would reveal occupied urban areas as a suffocating net, confining residents and restricting their movement. But most importantly, checkpoints serve as crucial points of filtration, making any movement within occupied territories a risky endeavor.

Checkpoints are places where civilians' trajectories intersect with the territorial regime of occupation, and this intersection determines a person's fate. For those unable to leave, this encounter is not the final one. The checkpoint is, therefore, a key infrastructure of the occupation regime. The conflict between spatial figures of trajectory and territory is not only defined by the regime's security measures but also by its policing of civic and gender identities suitable for the new spatial order.

Checkpoints are not fixed locations; their positions can change instantly. Some checkpoints are more static and supported by infrastructure, while others are simple roadblocks. Despite varying forms, checkpoints set up a "scene" in Goffman's sense, a space with defined roles and very limited ways to ensure a safe encounter. For forced migrants traversing territories of terror, the anticipation of violence at checkpoints is a constant reality, making preparation for these encounters essential. The survival strategy for those trying to leave the territory of terror lies in performance, donning a "safe identity" mask to survive. Understanding the real culture of occupation and guards' expectations, including their perceptions of who is Ukrainian and how men or women should behave, is essential for survival. Masking occurring at checkpoints is a natural response to the violence imposed by the occupying regime.

Research demonstrated that impersonating someone with a "safe identity" was not a permanent change but rather a temporary "mask" specifically crafted for checkpoints. For instance, two participants reported that, despite the need for elaborate performances at checkpoints, they were able to inform the Ukrainian Army about the locations of military equipment they saw on the way. This shows that escapees continued their resistance efforts even after putting on a "safe identity" mask.

The study also identified a pattern observed in digital migration studies: the inevitable symbiosis between migrants and their smartphones. In the Ukrainian context, distinguishing someone as Ukrainian solely based on their appearance or performance was impossible, thereby emphasizing the pivotal role of digital devices. The potential use of mobile phones for military intelligence made phone searches essential for guards, leading escapees to take stringent measures to secure their devices.

Interviews indicated that the intersection of gender and Ukrainian identity in relation to violence at checkpoints significantly influenced protective strategies. In women-only groups, fear of sexual violence was predominant, while in mixed-gender groups, the primary concern was violence against men. These fears shaped the strategies employed. And if concealing Ukrainian identity involved both "the cleaning of devices" and speaking Russian, gender-related measures have been mainly performative, like trying to look less feminine, less "conventionally attractive," etc.

Violence LGBTQI+ individuals experience at checkpoints is usually the result of phone searches. Similar to the Ukrainian "civil identity," LGBTQI+ people are exposed to violence at checkpoints based on the digital footprint they leave. This highlights the need for further investigation into the strategies implemented by this particular group.

As more people from occupied territories headed east are finding routes to exit Russia through third countries, interviewing them could reveal the unique safety strategies they employed compared to those fleeing westward. Furthermore, the exploration of intersectional violence could be extended by investigating how Ukrainian identity intersects not only with gender but also with factors such as age, ethnicity, race, disability, and social status. This chapter marks the beginning of

a discussion on how migrants can challenge the power dynamics of occupation regimes and protect themselves by mastering a “safe identity” for checkpoints.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to investigate the agency of forced migrants as they navigate urban landscapes to escape the military occupation. Focusing on checkpoints as literal physical filters that embody the occupation regime offers a spatial perspective on how violence unfolds within “territories of terror.” Exploring the intersection of “otherness,” particularly Ukrainian identity, and gender as social markers unveils a complex reality of violence at checkpoints.

The research uncovers how individuals craft a “safe identity” specifically for checkpoints, not merely to comply with regulations but as a vital survival tactic. Mastering “safe identity” becomes crucial at checkpoints as existential spaces that define whether one can pass or become a victim of the territorial regime. With Ukrainian identity being fluid, measures taken by forced migrants to ensure their safety primarily focus on their digital presence. By meticulously cleansing digital footprints, people attempt to evade suspicion and ensure safe passage. Gendered role expectations imposed on those attempting to pass checkpoints also require them to perform the safest version of themselves. The war in Ukraine, like any other war, is characterized by deeply polarized gender roles, which lead to the adoption of protective strategies tailored to the unique risks of gender-based violence. This adaptive strategy reflects remarkable resilience in the face of pervasive violence and uncertainty.

Note

- 1 “Security theater” refers to performances at security facilities in airports aimed at increasing the travelers’ feelings of safety. Both travelers and terrorists try to appear normal while screeners perform a role.

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